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ABSTRACT

Vocational education is needed for a strong economy, and the decline in vocational education enrollment is a serious concern. One recommendation is for more specific job training in the United States at the high school level, comparable to the apprenticeship programs in West Germany. Through the years, as certain needs have become apparent, vocational training has undergone changes and additions. In today's high technology age, vocational education needs to be upgraded continually to prepare workers who will use continually changing equipment and technology. In Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), vocational education in the public schools has become a high technology haven that trains students for work in the 21st century. An electronics teacher at Schenly High School offers an intense 4-year program that concludes with an advanced digital electronics course. Another distinctive feature of the Pittsburgh vocational programs is that academics are not neglected. Nationally, a coalition seeking to improve the agricultural curriculum has offered a blueprint for updating and expanding agricultural education that reflects the industry's technological evolution. Upgrading equipment and technology on limited budgets is a costly but not insurmountable problem. Sources of funding include the government, training paid for by trainees themselves, and business. (Fifteen implications and 10 references are listed.) (YLB)

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Vocational Education, a Current Concern

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Vocational Education, a Current Concern

The decline in vocational-education enrollment has become a serious, current concern. It has been voiced that the stiffer graduation requirements have hampered work-bound students.

Duke University sociology professor, Thomas Janoski (7), did an in-depth study in which he compared the vocational programs in West Germany with those in the United States. In West Germany, he found the apprenticeship programs in which students are trained in specific occupations unlike the comprehensive programs in our high schools.

A Durham Morning Herald staff reporter gave a brief review of Dr. Janoski's book, The Political Economy of Unemployment. Apparently, employers are more interested in people well-trained in specific jobs than they are in those whose training, though comprehensive, doesn't provide this. As a result of his study, Dr. Janoski suggests more specific job training in the United States at the high school level.

It was decided to select people at random to find out how they felt about specific training. Intellectuals were included in the random sampling, as it was felt that they might be more inclined toward comprehensive programs.

The question asked was, "If you were on your way to keep an important appointment, and your car broke down on a busy highway, would you settle for a mechanic whose English was far from perfect but who was an expert mechanic and could get you on your way in a very short time, or for one whose English was flawless but whose mechanical skill was somewhat lacking." Without

exception, all of those asked, preferred the expert mechanic.

It is recalled that many decades ago four boys in a rural school housing eight grades weren't at all academically inclined. Fortunately, the school board composed of adults most of whom were also not academically inclined voted to pay tuition for the boys in either of two vocational schools in two nearby cities. It is believed that the boys were to get their own transportation. All four graduated and successfully pursued the trade for which they had prepared, and all four were responsible and highly-respected citizens.

Throughout the years, as certain needs became apparent, vocational training underwent various changes and additions, C. J. Schaefer (9) has described some of these. Prior to the 1800's when schools began to offer vocational education as manual training, mechanical arts or, perhaps, some other such title they felt appropriate, serving an apprenticeship was the main form of job training.

In 1868, a Russian educator, Victor Della Vos, designed several courses schools could use to teach trades that had been formerly learned through apprenticeships, among them carpentry, blacksmithing and metal-turning.

At the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876, Della Vos's methods reached the United States where it interested some American educators, among them Calvin M. Woodward who in 1880 opened the Manual Training School in St. Louis, the first of its kind in the United States and John D. Runkle, the president of

Massachusetts Institute of Technology who established courses there modeled after Della Vos's system.

In the early 1900's the need for vocational education was officially recognized by our government and expressed through such things as the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 which financed job training in the high schools and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which provided on-the-job training for unemployed young men from 1933 to 1942.

During World War II, vocational schools operated around the clock in order to train the many workers needed for war production. After the war, the G.I. Bill provided funds for veterans to study at various types of educational institutions.

In the 1960's and 1970's, the high unemployment prompted further government support for vocational education. Lack of sufficient funding continues to be a problem in this high-technological age in which we're now living and which calls for continual upgrading of equipment and technology.

The title of a recent article, "At Voc-Ed Show, Latest in Technology Turns Heads," by Lonnie Harp (6), expresses very clearly the need for upgrading vocational education to meet today's needs. There are those who feel that teacher recruitment and qualification testing are behind the need, and, of course, money is needed to meet these needs adequately.

A staff writer for Education Week, a reputable educational publication, reported that Elizabeth Dole, retiring Secretary of Labor, appointed fifteen education, business, and labor officials

to serve on an advisory commission to explore a voluntary accrediting system for industrial-training programs. An explanation follows:

The National Advisory Commission on Work-Based Learning will spend two years evaluating strategies for expanding apprenticeship programs which have traditionally provided hands-on learning for craftsmen. In announcing the commission, Ms. Dole said expanded work-based learning programs would provide new workers with "portable credentials" that vouch for their competence. Such a program also would give employers a better idea of what skills applicants have mastered.

The commission to be chaired by Jack MacAllister, chairman and chief executive officer of U.S. West, Inc., will aim at improving opportunities for students who, Ms. Dole said, have been forgotten "because there is often no dignified alternative to the college-preparatory path."

Ms. Dole's feeling about "no dignified alternative" is supported by Daniel Gurskey (5) in his article, entitled, "It's Not Just Shop Class Anymore," followed by an opening summary, "Once considered a dumping ground where poor students learned outdated skills, vocational education in Pittsburgh's public schools has become a high-tech haven, training students for work in the 21st century." This is especially good for Pittsburgh's economy since steel has been replaced as the source of prosperity by high-tech firms, medical-research companies, etc. An example of up-dating follows:

Electronics teacher, Al Puskaric, helps his students at Schenly High School in Pittsburgh prepare for jobs in the new economy. The program is more intense than most vocational programs as it requires four years instead of two. Each fall 80

freshmen enter the program, study basic electricity and, by the end of their fourth year, have progressed through advanced digital electronics.

Pittsburgh's schools meeting Pittsburgh's needs is exemplary. Obviously, needs in various areas of our country vary, making this a serious consideration in the designing and funding of programs.

Another distinctive feature of the vocational programs in the Pittsburgh schools is that academics are not neglected. An example follows: In regular English classes which the vocational students take, they write themes about technology and electronics as well as traditional themes. Grading is explained as follows:

Puskaric's students get three grades on every electronics assignment -- one for their mastery of the electronics concepts, one from an English teacher on the quality of their writing, and one from a business teacher for their command of computer and word-processing skills.

We've had many reports about the high dropout rate among vocational students but such is not the case in the Pittsburgh schools where the dropout rate among the 6000 vocational students is reported as low. However, this is not the case in all Pennsylvania and other school systems as evidenced by various reports.

A staff writer for Education Week offered several examples, one of which follows: "The Pennsylvania Council on Vocational Education says enrollment in vocational programs that train students for careers in health, agriculture, marketing and

technical fields has fallen by about 40 percent in four years since the state boosted the number of academic credits required for graduation. Still another example voicing the same drawback was given by the staff writer; the example follows: "Harlan Geise (4), executive director of the Iowa council on Vocational Education, says many states have seen enrollments plummet in recent years. Much of the decline, adds Mr. Geise, who monitors such trends for the National Association of State Councils on Vocational Education has been attributed to graduation requirements that fill students' schedules with academic courses."

Millicent Lawton (2 & 8) reported that a coalition seeking to improve the agricultural curriculum and improve the nation's agricultural literacy has offered a blueprint for updating and expanding agricultural education nationwide. The plan represents the collaboration of several groups, among them the Education Department, the American Vocational Association and the National Council for Agricultural Education. Ms. Lawton quoted some of the members.

Larry Case (2), who is the senior program specialist for agriculture in the U.S. Office of Education, is reported as offering that agricultural courses must reflect the industry's technological evolution and not focus solely on traditional farming practices.

There were others who felt the same as Mr. Case. Mr. Pope (8), the group's director, said that courses must include such topics as agri-marketing, biotechnology, food science and water

quality. "The days of plows, cows, chicks and hicks are over in agriculture," he is also reported as saying.

A sizable number of people should be helped through the revamping of agricultural education, as Mr. Case reported that there are roughly 500,000 high school students in 8000 schools who are enrolled in agricultural courses.

Upgrading equipment and technology on limited budgets is a costly, but not, necessarily, an insurmountable problem which must be overcome. There are several sources of funding, the government, for one. However, it is sincerely believed that greater good to more people could come through improved handling of funding by including better monitoring of trainees and those doing the training. Throughout the years, witness has been borne to considerable waste in government funding. For example, there have been reported cases in which young people were trained in a chosen trade at the government's expense, only to decide that they didn't like it and wanted to be trained in another, and were allowed to do so. Those doing the training had nothing to lose as, reportedly, they were given another group of trainees. It is felt, too, that in addition to more-careful monitoring, it might be wise to include a course in ethics. As a matter of fact, help in dealing with values relating to human conduct with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions should be offered to children at an early age. Seeking the cooperation of the parents can be a big help in this respect.

Finally, what has happened to an individual's funding

himself/herself? It has been a privilege throughout many years to know a substantial number of young people, some minorities included, who have worked, saved their money and paid for training in a trade of their choice. It has been a further privilege to see these self-reliant young people become productive citizens.

Another source of funding is business, and there are those who feel that business should be doing much more. Actually, there are some active business leaders. Peter West (10) reported on a school-reform plan issued by Arizona business leaders. He wrote:

The business group launched its education committee in late 1988 because of member concerns over the poor mathematics and reading skills among job applicants.

The group argues that the educational system must be radically changed to reverse a downward slide in educational quality.

"We are calling for revolution, not evolution," the report states.

Business does "have a point"; however there must not be a "takeover" of the schools by business. This can be best avoided by collaboration of all concerned, among them, the schools, business, industry, federal and state lawmakers, parents, students and taxpayers. Hopefully, this collaboration would result in more funding by business. Certainly, well-trained workers are an asset to a business, not a liability.

Advantage was taken of a toll-free call to IBM and the person answering the phone was in total agreement with the need

for collaboration; schools can't do it alone; nor can business and industry.

It is concluded that vocational education is needed for a strong economy and that programs must be updated if they are to be effective in this high-tech age. David Broder (1) summed it up quite well when he wrote, "But the bottom line, which no one seriously challenges, is that the difference between a bright future and the prospect of a steadily declining living standard for the majority of Americans rests on increasing the skills of today's and tomorrow's workers. We had best be about the task." Fortunately, the problem has been identified, and there has been some collaboration in trying to solve it.

Implications

1. For effective programs, there must be continuing collaboration among all concerned -- schools, business and industry, federal and state lawmakers, taxpayers, parents.

2. Vocational programs should contain some academics as well as courses in which students become skillful in marketable trades.

3. Accreditation should be such that an employer is assured that the applicant is fully qualified for the position he is seeking.

4. There should be much more flexibility at the local levels in administering funded programs.

5. Closer monitoring of trainees and those doing the training is advised in order to prevent abuses.

6. Courses in, or discussions about, ethics might also help to reduce abuses.

7. Self-reliance is believed to be a help in building self-esteem and should be encouraged early on.

8. Involvement of parents should be sought.

9. Voters should elect those representatives who are truly interested in education -- not their own aggrandizement.

10. Greater care must be taken in determining the need for funding, as it has been reported that it has been sent to an area for conditions that were virtually non-existent there.

11. Information about successful vocational education

programs should be shared.

12. All those concerned with vocational education should take advantage of any information pertaining to it -- surveys, statistics, research -- whether offered by schools, business and industry, government, both state and federal, or by concerned citizens.

13. Serious attention must be given to teacher recruitment if programs are to be successful.

14. Advances in technology are so rapid that great care must be taken in buying expensive equipment, as there have been newspaper reports that some fairly new equipment is already outdated.

15. Vocational education programs should be designed in the best interests of ALL students; the uniqueness of each must be recognized and respected.

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